The New York Times
nytimes.com

December 18, 2002

U.S. Ignores Failure Data at Outset of Flights

By WILLIAM J. BROAD

A week ago over the Pacific, in the latest $100 million test of the nation's prototype antimissile system, an interceptor warhead failed to separate from its booster rocket. It missed its intended target by hundreds of miles and burned up in the atmosphere, while the mock enemy warhead it was meant to destroy zoomed along unscathed.

A resounding failure?

Not according to the Pentagon.

In its new assessment process, the tests that really count are those in which the warhead makes it past the booster-rocket stage to what Pentagon experts call "the endgame": trying to find, home in on, and hit a mock warhead.

The new logic ignores tests that fail in the earlier, less challenging stages — like the one on Dec. 11, the third in eight tests of the long-range system since 1999, according to the Pentagon.

Private experts say the new logic helped clear the way for President Bush's announcement yesterday that the missile interceptors would be deployed in Alaska and California. But critics say that not taking account of early-stage test failures is like wiping the slate clean of laggards in footraces or political contests. By the new logic, the races acknowledge only winners and runners-up.

Lt. Gen. Ronald T. Kadish of the Air Force, who leads the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency, told Congress in June that the antimissile interceptors had a very high success rate — 88 percent. His claim was based on 25 tests, including both long- and short-range interceptors.

This high rate of "endgame success," General Kadish said, shows "the feasibility of missile defense." The availability of technologies to protect the nation, he added, "should not be in question."

But others disagree vehemently, saying the real numbers prove that antimissile defense is a mirage.

In the current issue of Arms Control Today, published in Washington by the Arms Control Association, Dr. George N. Lewis and Dr. Lisbeth Gronlund of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology say the Pentagon not only ignores setbacks in the early flight stages but omits some endgame failures, too.

The true endgame success rate, they calculate, is 71 percent. And that of the long-range interceptor, they add, is only 61 percent.

In any event, they say, the endgame concept is irrelevant, since "quality control errors can and have occurred in all phases of the tests," implying similar possibilities for real antimissile systems.

If all the failures are taken into account, they write, the success rate of the long-range system drops to 41 percent.